

## As Australia becomes less religious, our parliament becomes more so

Written by Jonathan D James, Adjunct Lecturer, School of Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University

---



Christianity's effect on Australian politics is far from waning. Jonathan James, Author provided

*In a nation that is increasingly secular, religion still plays a vital role in the way we run our country. In [this series](#), we examine the role of religion in Australian politics and education.*

---

Even though the 2016 Census [revealed](#) that more than 30% of the Australian population identify as having “no religion” – a label that overtook the Catholic faith figure – Christianity's effect on Australian politics is far from waning.

Surprisingly, Christians currently number more than 40% of the Coalition government and about 30% of the Labor opposition. This is high for a nation labelled “[secular](#)”.

### Phases of Christianity in party politics

A snapshot of the relationship between Christianity and Australian politics reveals three phases:

-

the sectarian phase (when Labor was primarily Catholic and Liberals were Protestant);

-

the Catholic migration into the Liberal Party phase; and

-

the strong Christian personality phase – where politicians from both parties came out to wear their faith on their sleeves.

## As Australia becomes less religious, our parliament becomes more so

Written by Jonathan D James, Adjunct Lecturer, School of Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University

---

Traditionally, Labor and Liberal politicians were staunchly divided as Catholic and Protestant respectively. Catholics in Australia, primarily from the working class (and of Irish descent), were attracted to the Labor Party. Liberals came from the non-working class and were mainly of Anglican and Presbyterian backgrounds.

During the first world war, Catholics in Labor took their anti-conscription view to new levels. [Catholic Archbishop Daniel Mannix](#) framed Labor's anti-military draft stance in terms of the Protestant–Catholic divide, reinforcing the sectarianism of the two parties.

In the years that followed, Catholics continued to vote mainly for Labor. But with changing socioeconomic patterns, many Catholics moved into the middle class and were more inclined to vote Liberal. The Labor Party split in 1955, when its anti-communist faction broke away to give birth to the Democratic Labor Party (DLP).

This was the start of a new development in the political landscape of the nation. When the DLP lost momentum Catholic Labor politicians soon started migrating to the Liberal Party, ushering in the second phase of politics and faith. Together with "[Howard's battlers](#)", Catholic politicians successfully kept the Coalition in power from 1996 through to 2007.

Throughout John Howard's leadership, the Coalition gained votes from regular church-goers of both Catholic and Protestant persuasions, ostensibly bringing sectarianism to an end. Howard's Coalition also made overtures to the newer non-denominational churches.

More recently, Australian politics and religion has entered another phase with those willing to boldly posture their faith in the public sphere.

Unlike Menzies, John Howard and Paul Keating, who though religious kept their faith quiet, [Kevin Rudd](#)

, [Tony Abbott](#)

and former Liberal senator

[Cory Bernardi](#)

moved Christian values from the periphery to the centre when they declared their strong

convictions on faith and policy.

## **Negotiating Christian values**

While religion and politics operate quite differently in the US to Australia, the high numbers of Christians in Australian parties are sometimes under-reported.

Arguably, the large proportion of Christians in the main parties enables Christian politicians to negotiate their religious values in four main ways:

### **1. A strong parliamentary Christian fellowship**

When federal parliament is in session, the [Parliamentary Christian Fellowship](#) meets fortnightly, with about 60 members from all sides of politics in attendance. This is more than a quarter of total parliamentary members.

Not all Christians in parliament choose to attend the fellowship. Anecdotal evidence suggests that guest speakers, prayer and Bible studies with focused discussions are regular features of these meetings.

### **2. Faith-based delivery of social and community services**

The government has outsourced approximately [two-thirds of community services to faith-based agencies](#) at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars.

Typically, these services focus on youth, aged care, family support, homeless programs and mental health.

### 3. Selective faith keeping

Christian politicians are typically circumspect and only “walk the talk” on vital matters. They have their own hierarchy on faith values.

Liberal senator [Eric Abetz’s comments](#) , while here a criticism of the church, reflect the fact that Christian politicians such as Abetz pick and choose values for their own ends:

... The church has an important role in general terms to say what is the measure of a fair tax system, or the measure of a fair Native Title regime; but to say, ‘a tax on food is immoral’ is bordering on being immoral itself.

### 4. Invoking the conscience vote on controversial moral issues

The use of conscience votes demonstrates the high place given to religious convictions and sensibilities.

Conscience votes cut across party lines (although Liberals invoke these far more than Labor) and give ample room for moral interpretations of matters such as euthanasia, abortion and marriage equality.

The “secularisation” of Australia seems to be counterbalanced by a strong, Christian political foundation. Arguably, politicians are generally motivated by pragmatism, however, faith’s place in Australian politics invites further investigation.

As Australia becomes less religious, paradoxically, Christianity seems to be flourishing in both the Coalition government and the Labor Party. Thus, politicians are influencing the nation in particularly interesting ways.

## As Australia becomes less religious, our parliament becomes more so

Written by Jonathan D James, Adjunct Lecturer, School of Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University

---

Read other articles in the series [here](#).

*Jonathan D James is affiliated with AEF International; the media, culture & society research group in CREATEC at Edith Cowan University, and Sheridan College.*

Authors: Jonathan D James, Adjunct Lecturer, School of Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University

**Read more** <http://theconversation.com/as-australia-becomes-less-religious-our-parliament-becomes-more-so-80456>